

The Violation of Cooperative Principle and the Four Maxims in Psychological Consulting

LA VIOLATION DU PRINCIPE COOPERATIF ET LES QUATRE MAXIMES DANS LA CONSULTATION PSYCHOLOGIQUE

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Abstract: The Cooperative Principle (CP) and the four maxims are widely believed by linguists to be essential in the implementation of conversations. However, CP and the four maxims are also frequently flouted on such occasions as joke-telling or achieving politeness. This paper focuses on the environment of psychological consulting and attempts to explore the violation of CP in this specific environment. Through an analysis of conversational implicature and the occurrences of the violation of CP in the three selected excerpts from *The female Psychologist* by Bi Shumin, it is found that the recognition of conversational implicature is crucial for the understanding of the non-cooperative attitudes of the speakers and the violation of one or more CP maxims.

Key words: the Cooperative Principle (CP), four maxims, conversational implicature, flouting, *The Female Psychologist*

Résumé: Le Principe Coopératif (CP) et les quatre maximes qui sont largement estimé par les linguistes sont essentiels à la mise en oeuvre des conversations. Toutefois, le CP et les quatre maximes sont souvent bafoués en telle occasion comme la blague ou l'achèvement de la politesse. Le présent document se concentre sur l'environnement de consultation psychologique et essaye à explorer la violation de CP dans cet environnement spécifique. A travers une analyse de l'implication conversationnel et les occurrences de la violation de CP dans les trois extraits sélectionnés de *La Femme Psychologue* par Bi Shumin, il est constaté que la reconnaissance de l'implication conversationnel est crucial pour la compréhension de l'attitude non-coopérative des interlocuteurs et la violation de l'un ou plusieurs CP maximes.

Mots-Clés: le Principe Coopératif (CP), quatre maxims, implication conversationnel, moquerie, *La Femme Psychologue*

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1. INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Co-operative Principle and the Four Maxims

It is widely believed by linguists and other researchers who are doing pragmatics that cooperation is essential for a conversation to take place. In order to make a conversation go on successfully and smoothly, the speakers on both sides should hold a cooperative attitude. To make this point clear, Mey (2001) gives an example in the hope that it may explain the situation in which a non-cooperative utterance can lead to a conversational failure. The story happened when a six-year-old girl Sara played with her little bouncing ball in a room with "bookshelves all around and all the way up to the ceiling" (p. 72). When she got her bouncing ball lost somewhere in the room, she asked the owner of the books whether he had seen her lost ball or not. The owner, who happened to see the "ball's wayward course" (p. 73), however, gave the little girl a non-cooperative answer:

Why don't you look behind Volume 6 of Dostoyevski's Collected Works? (p. 73)

Even without linguistic knowledge, we may still be able to sense that there is something weird in this answer. Normally, it is impossible for a girl at six to know anything about the Russian writer Dostoyevski unless she has been taught the knowledge, which, however, is obviously not the case in the story above. Thus, it is impossible for the girl to find her lost ball according to the instructions given by the man. The man might utter these words so as to show off his knowledge and collections of classical works to impress the adults present, in which case the target of his utterance is the adult audience, not the little girl he seemed to be addressing. Under such circumstances, inappropriate words uttered by the interlocutor had led to a conversational failure in that the six-year-old interlocutor would never find her lost ball based on the instructions given by the speaker.

In order to guarantee successful communication in everyday life, it is believed that there should be some norms or beliefs shared by the speakers that govern the communication. The philosopher H. P. Grice (1975, 1989) first put forward this idea.

Our talk exchanges ... are characteristically, to some degree at least, co-operative efforts; and each participants recognises in them, to some extent, a common purpose or set of purposes, or at least a mutually accepted direction... We might then formulate a rough general principle which participants will be expected...to observe, namely: Make your conversational contribution such as required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged. (Grice, 1989, p. 26, cited in Blakemore, 1992, p. 25)

Grice calls it the Cooperative Principle, and further develops it into four Maxims, namely, quantity maxim, quality maxim, relation maxim and manner maxim. According to Grice (1975), quantity maxim means to provide with adequate information but not excessively adequate; quality maxim means to tell what you believe to be true and what have adequate evidence to rely on; Relation maxim means to be relevant; manner maxim means to tell in a explicit, brief and orderly manner.

The Flouting of a Maxim

The Cooperative Principle (CP) becomes greatly influential, and meanwhile also comes across objections and criticisms. Among the objections is the opinion that the CP is not practical and does not apply to "real language use" (Leech, 1983, p. 80). Larkin and O'Malley (1973, cited in Leech, 1983) claim that conversational constraints such as those of the CP do not work because the majority of declarative sentences do not have an information-bearing function. Another objection lies in the belief

that the CP is not so universal as to be capable of applying to all language communities (Keenan, 1976, cited in Leech, 1983). As pointed out by Mey (2001), people like Levinson, who hold the notion of CP, “tend to overlook a number of problems that actually occur between cooperating humans”. Three areas where such problems will possibly arise are summarized as follows: (1) The assumption of cooperation is “simply too broad and sweeping”; (2) “[T]here are significant intercultural differences in cooperative behavior”; (3) “[C]ertain forms of social (including language) behavior are preferred (and hence rewarded), while others are subject to sanction” (p. 76).

Due to the problems detected, there are occasions when one or several maxims are absent during communication processes. The occurrence of such occasions is called “flouting” a maxim. For instance, in joke-telling, what the audience expects is not a story with exactly qualitative, quantitative, relevant and clear descriptions; instead, they want to be cheated, or even fooled, so that they can be surprised or burst into a laughter as they are supposed to after hearing a joke. As has been explained by Mey (2001), “good authors have always something up their sleeves, and may allow themselves deliberate omissions, misleading statements, uninformative or disinformative remarks and all sorts of narrative tricks in order to better develop the plot” (p. 78). The same thing happens in the production of movies. As a matter of fact, some movies will deliberately mislead the audience in order to create a special effect. Take the movie *Secret* directed by Jay Chou for example. In the first half of the movie, we, as the audience, are made to believe that the heroine Xiaoyu is a classmate of Ye Xianglun (Ye), the hero. However, only when we are exposed to the second half of the movie are we able to realize that actually Xiaoyu can only be seen by Ye himself as she lives in a different “time” and space and the magic power of the piano score can only allow one person to see Xiaoyu—the first person she sees when she arrives at Ye’s time and space. After knowing the truth, when we look back to the scenes in the first half of the movie, we suddenly find that we are indeed cheated by the movie since many scenes do indicate that Xiaoyu is actually transparent to other people except Ye. We are not fool. We are just fooled. This special treatment of the plot has violated the CP maxims of Quantity and Manner, yet it does provide the audience with a happy surprise.

Besides, certain maxims of CP may be ignored when taking politeness into consideration. Principle of Politeness (PP) was put forward by Leech (1983). As he believes, the PP is a necessary compliment to the CP and saves the CP by offering explanation of those situations that it fails to explain (1983). However, PP and CP can also cause conflicts between each other. In conversation b, speaker B has deliberately violated the quantity maxim by not commenting on Agatha because she is not to be missed. This ignorance is far better than the outright comment—“we won’t miss Agatha at all”. Thus, when a conflict occurs between CP maxims and being polite, as expressed by Mey (2001), “cooperation takes a back seat to politeness” (p. 81). Similarly, in the military environment, the standardized replies of “Yes Sir!” are uttered by subordinates for the need of being polite to their superordinates regardless of their real willingness.

A: We’ll all miss Bill and Agatha, won’t we?

B: Well, we’ll all miss BILL. (with rising-falling intonation on the emphasized BILL) (Mey, 2001, p. 81)

Among those researchers who hold a different view towards CP and the four maxims, Attardo (1997, 1999) went so far as to postulate “a negative counterpart to Grice’s Cooperative Principle”—the Non-Cooperative Principle (NCP) in order to “explore the domain of non-cooperative interactions (Eisterhold et al, 2006, p. 1243). “We define non-cooperation simply as the opposite of cooperation, i.e., a situation in which two or more agents act in such a way as to achieve goals which they do not share and that are mutually exclusive (on non-cooperation, see also Thomas, 1995; Lindblom, 2001, and Mooney, 2004) (Eisterhold et al, 2006, p. 1243).

Thus, the different situations in which CP can be flouted have aroused the interests of the researchers ever since this principle was put forward by Grice (1975). To explain this phenomenon, I once again have to quote Mey’s (2001) words, “there is cooperation itself, taken as a general, inviolable and indisputable rule of behavior. As has been pointed out by many authors..., this assumption is simply too

broad and sweeping”(p. 76). Therefore, when taking into consideration the differences in culture, education, occupation and so on, we may also find that the applicability of CP differs.

Research Questions

The present study focuses on the environment of psychological consulting and attempts to explore the violation of CP in this specific environment. Although CP has been widely studied—either followed or doubted—its application in psychological consulting is, however, rarely mentioned. What’s important is that the conversations in a psychological consulting are very different from daily talks and thus worth noticing. By studying the violation of Cooperative Principle in this special situation, we may find out the characteristics of the language used in psychological consulting. In analyzing the conversations that take place in a psychological consulting, we may also need to read between the lines to sense the real intentions of the psychologist; in other words, it is of great importance to figure out the hidden meanings implied by the utterances. The linguistic term “implicature” “is derived from the verb ‘to imply’” (Mey, 2001, p. 45). As Explained by Mey, “[a] conversational implicature is ... something which is implied in conversation, that is, something which is left implicit in actual language use” (p. 45). Conversational implicature is closely related to CP in that on the one hand, there is always something implied in an utterance; only if we hold the belief that our interlocutors are speaking in accordance with Cooperative Principle can we be confident enough to interpret the hidden meanings. On the other hand, conversational implicature may also help analyze whether the speaker means to cooperate or not. This is what happens in normal daily talks. What about in special occasions such as psychological consulting? That is to be studied in the present paper.

Thus, the research questions of the present study are:

1st. What is the relationship between conversational implicature and the violation of CP in psychological consulting?

2nd. What are the characteristics of the language used in psychological consulting from a pragmatic perspective? How is the violation of one or more CP maxims revealed by these characteristics during the process of psychological consulting ?

2. DATA COLLECTION

The data in the present study are conversations between the female psychologist and her visitors² collected from the novel *The Female Psychologist* by Bi Shumin. Before writing this book, Bi Shumin had been a psychologist for years. The hands-on experience enables her to present in this book the process of psychological consulting close to reality. The reasoning and questioning in the novel reflect, to some extent, what happens in a real psychological consulting. Thus, it is meaningful to analyze the conversations that take place in the novel as an initiative effort to explore the domain of psychological consulting from a pragmatic perspective.

In the present paper, three excerpts are selected as the data for analysis. All of the excerpts are conversations between the female psychologist He Dun (HD) and her visitors. Each of the three excerpts has reflected some special aspects of the language used in psychological consulting. The analysis of the excerpts will focus on the occasions where violations of CP maxims occur in the conversation, especially the words uttered by the psychologist. The methodology of conversation analysis will be adopted to take a close look at certain lines of the conversations.

² Instead of calling them patients, Bi Shumin, the author of *The Female Psychologist*, call those who pay a visit to her clinic “visitors”.

3. DISCUSSION

Three excerpts are studied in this section. In each excerpt, the violation of one or more maxims of CP is pointed out and analyzed as a way of exploring the flouting of CP in the context of psychological consulting. In doing so, I am attempting to make an initial effort of revealing some of the characteristics of the language used during psychological consulting from a pragmatic perspective.

Excerpt 1:

In this conversation, HD is the female psychologist who will conduct the consulting. The visitor Su San (a fake name; He used to call himself Zhang San) is very cautious about his privacy and will not let people other than HD see his face. Under such circumstances, at the appointed time, they meet and the psychological consulting takes place.

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Line 1. “你到我這裏來，又做了如此周密的保密準備，您被什麼所困擾？”賀頓問。

Line 2. 蘇三說：“我想解決說話的問題。”

Line 3. 對於這位以前是張三現在是蘇三的問題，賀頓設想了很多種，卻沒有想到如此平淡無奇。“您說話有什麼問題？”賀頓問。

Line 4. “您看我說話有什麼問題？”蘇三反問。

Line 5. 賀頓不會上這個當，就說：“您有什麼問題您是最清楚的，還是您來說吧。”

Line 6. 蘇三說：“中國中醫有句古話，叫做‘望而知之謂之神’，我已經給了您提示，您應該略知一二才對。”

Line 7. 這個蘇三果然很難纏。賀頓說：“我不是神，我只是和您一道探索您的問題的心理師。如果您對我還有所保留的話，吃虧的是您。”

Line 8. 蘇三饒有興趣地說：“我會吃什麼虧呢？”

Line 9. 賀頓說：“您的時間。您的金錢。還有您的感情付出。”

Line 10. 蘇三說：“賀老師你能猜出我有多少錢嗎？”

Line 11. 賀頓說：“我猜不出。”

Line 12. 蘇三說：“賀老師既然猜不出來，我也不便告訴賀老師到底是多少，省得把賀老師嚇住了。”

Line 13. 賀頓說：“蘇三，你低估了我，我並不像你想像的那樣膽小。不過，從你剛才的話裏，有一點可以肯定，你的問題是金錢所解決不了的。”

Line 14. 這話像彈片紮中了蘇三的穴位。他說：“佩服賀老師一語中的，的確是這樣。我剛才是在考驗賀老師，看賀老師能不能解決我的問題。現在，我要告訴賀老師，你已經成功地經受住了我的考驗。”

..... (Bi, 2007, pp. 55-56)

This conversation occurs when Su San (Su) pays his first visit to HD. Su does not trust the psychologist as they have just met; thus, when HD asks him what is wrong with his speaking (Line 3), he does not answer the question although he is more than able to answer it. Instead, he asks HD back what she thinks is wrong with his speaking (Line 4). This reply violates the maxim of quantity which requires to “make your contribution as informative as is required for the current purposes of the exchange” (Levinson, 1983, pp. 101-102, cited in Lan, 2007, p. 82). It violates this maxim in that it provides too little information to answer the question asked by the consultant. To be more exact, he basically answers nothing. Furthermore, his reply also violates the maxim of relation because while expected to explain the

problem of his speaking, he asks a question instead. The conversational implicature of this specific utterance is probably that “I am not willing to answer your question as I do not trust you that much. Since you are a psychologist who is good at analyzing what people think, you may tell me what my problem is as a proof of your expertise”. In fact, it is the conversational implicature, or the hidden information, that has decided that the overall attitude of Su is non-cooperative, which thus leads to his violation of the two maxims.

When the floor is given back to HD, she, as a well-trained psychologist, will not easily give in in face of the challenge from her visitor. She once again throws the question back to Su (Line 5). Similarly, it violates the two maxims. But the reason for this behavior of HD's is different. First, as a consultant, she needs her visitor to explain his own problem thoroughly. Second, as has been explained explicitly by the author, she will not give in by answering Su's question because she is aware of Su's intention of testing her expertise. It does not make any sense for a psychologist to be fooled around by a visitor, thus HD is not supposed to answer Su's question; instead, what she has to do is to throw this question back to Su and finds out what on earth is wrong with his speaking.

In Line 13, after replying to Su's words, HD suddenly shifts the topic and makes a comment on Su's problem—it cannot be solved by money no matter what it concerns. It is this comment that helps HD win Su's trust and respect. This shift of topic or attention reveals the wisdom of this psychologist. First, the previous conversation has gone into a deadlock as the topics are not relevant at all. Second, the visitor has been non-cooperative due to his distrust of the psychologist, which is a disaster to the consulting. Third, in face of the immediate question, she cannot fight back easily. Thus, a comment which is obviously true and meanwhile does not do any harm is the best way for her to escape from the present topic. Pragmatically speaking, HD's reply violates the maxim of relation as it is not relevant to the question posed by Su. However, this reply is indeed a very smart one under such circumstances. In this case, HD's violation of the maxim of relation is due to her effort of mitigating the tension between the visitor and herself and to further shift the topic back on track. In other words, her violation of the maxim helps.

Excerpt 2:

This conversation happens between the female psychologist HD and a female visitor Sang Shan (SS). SS's registration form tells HD that her being here for consultation is due to her disappointment in a love affair.

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Line 1. “你想說什麼呢？”賀頓開場。

Line 2. “就是我在表上填的那個問題。”桑珊不願意復述“失戀”這個字眼。

Line 3. 失戀的人們常常是這樣的，他們躲避這個辭彙，好像洪水猛獸。心理師的職責之一就是要人們正視問題。如果連正眼瞧瞧都不敢，何談解決？賀頓要鼓勵桑珊直面慘澹人生。“你在表上談的是什麼問題？”賀頓誇張地看著表格，以證明自己是明知故問。

Line 4. 桑珊是聰明女子，領悟到了賀頓的用意，但還是說不出來。安靜了一會兒，話沒出來，眼淚出來了。

..... (Bi, 2007, p. 42)

In this conversation, when HD asks SS about the reason for her visit as she usually does, SS is not willing to say it out, although she has already written it down on the registration form as early as when she made this appointment. Instead of telling her story directly as asked, she replies, “My reason is just about the very thing I mentioned in the registration form.” As has been analyzed by the author, SS's reluctance actually implies her unwillingness to repeat the situation she is in—she is disappointed in a love affair—because the repetition may be too hard for her as it brings back a lot of old memories and sadness. This is the conversational implicature of her words. As a matter of fact, HD already knows the reason as she has seen the form in advance. However, although fully aware of the very thing that is going on in SS's mind, HD still will not give in, but insists on asking what is mentioned in her form (Line 3). In

other words, she chooses to deliberately ignore the conversational implicature of SS's utterance because it is part of the treatment during a psychological consulting to let the visitors themselves face their problems bravely, as has been explained by Bi, the author of the novel. In doing so, HD actually violates the maxim of manner to some extent because normally, she is not supposed to ask what is already known as it is not being "brief" at all if she so does. Judging from the fact that she is clear about what is implied by SS's words, we may claim that HD is adopting a non-cooperative attitude when uttering Line 3.

Why this conversation does not sound normal is perhaps due to the reason that one maxim of the CP usually followed in normal conversations has been violated. However, in a psychological consulting, it is something inevitable as solving the visitors' problems is not always an easy job, but a painstaking process in most of the cases. To say what the visitors want to hear is not a good policy for psychologists; instead, language confrontations with them may serve as the medication with magic powers that can elicit their true feelings; and that will be the start of the healing process. In this case, it is the HD's realization of the conversational implicature of SS's words that betrays her non-cooperative attitude. Besides, in a psychologist-visitor conversation, the maintenance of CP is not always helpful to visitors; actually, confrontations are even encouraged sometimes as a way of leading the visitors to face the reality and eliciting visitors' true feelings.

Excerpt 3:

This conversation occurs between HD, the female psychologist, and an old female visitor Qiao Yuhua (Qiao). This is their first meet. Like Su in excerpt 1, Qiao does not trust the young lady in front of her, thus, she wants to test whether HD is smart and sensitive enough to be a good psychologist.

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Line 1. 一位風度優雅的老太太帶著寬簷呢帽，有一點像伊莉莎白女王，顯得風姿綽約。看到賀頓進來，第一個站起身說：“您就是心理師嗎？”

Line 2. 賀頓說：“是的。我就是。”

Line 3. 老太太苛刻地打量著她，問：“我叫喬玉華。你看起來很年輕嘛！”

Line 4. 賀頓明白老人家的潛臺詞是——你行嗎？回答說：“心理學這門科學本身也很年輕。”她的潛臺詞是一年紀大的人以前也並沒有機會掌握它。

Line 5. 這番潛臺詞的較量，讓老太太比較滿意…… (Bi, 2007, p. 73)

In Line 3, after introducing herself, Qiao tells HD that she looks very young. This utterance can actually be understood as a challenge of HD's expertise as being young is often connected with a lack of experience. This conversational implicature is made explicit by the author in the first part of Line 4. However, in face of this challenge, HD is quick-witted enough to fight back, "The discipline of psychology itself is also young" (Line 4). HD's words imply that in psychology, age is not the criterion for judging expertise—an old person can not necessarily become a good psychologist, and vice versa. HD's comment on the discipline of psychology seems not to be a proper reply to Qiao's comment on her age. Thus, HD's utterance violates the maxim of relation—it is not relevant to the previous topic. It is undeniable that during this conversation, neither of the two speakers intends to be cooperative. On the one hand, it is understandable for the visitors to challenge the psychologist as they will later have to tell their most private stories to this person who is basically a stranger. They are behaving cautiously to challenge the psychologist as a way of testing their abilities. On the other hand, the reason why the psychologist HD should fight back with words is that she has to prove her quick wit to the visitors so as to build up their confidence in her. Only if the visitor trusts the psychologist can they speak out their secrets, which is a necessary step for the psychologist to solve their problems.

4. LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The study of the language characteristics of psychological consulting from a pragmatic perspective is new. The present study is just making an initial effort to dig out part of the truth. There are limitations in the present study and more efforts are needed in the exploration of this field in the future. First, the data used in this paper are not collected from the real psychological consulting processes, but from the descriptions of a novel. Although the author herself is a very experienced psychologist, what is written in a novel cannot be a complete reflection of the reality. Thus, in future research, it is recommended that conversations from real psychological consulting should be collected and studied in the exploration of language characteristics of psychological consulting from a pragmatic perspective. Second, more factors should be taken into consideration such as gender and cultural background. In other words, the consulting styles of male and female consultants may differ from each other; the means of consulting in China and other countries may not be the same either. Actually, even consultants from the same background may differ in terms of their ways of consulting due to their different personalities and some other factors. Thus, it is important to study the psychological consulting conducted by different psychologists that include both male and female, both Chinese and foreigners. That is how a thorough analysis of the language characteristics of psychological consulting can be made.

5. CONCLUSION

In the section of discussion, I have analyzed three excerpts selected from the novel *The Female Psychologist* written by Bi Shumin. Through the analysis of conversational implicature and the occurrences of the violation of CP in those conversations, I find that conversational implicature and the violation of CP are closely related to each other in that the recognition of conversational implicature, or hidden meanings is vital for the understanding of the non-cooperative attitudes of the speakers, thus leading to the understanding of the violation of one or more CP maxims.

The violation of CP maxims often happens due to the special needs of psychological consulting. The violation is actually decided by the characteristics of the language used in this process:

1st. When the psychologist and the visitor first meet each other, the visitor will usually challenge the capability of the psychologist. Under such circumstances, the psychologist needs to build up his or her authoritative image by winning the battle of words with the visitor. Always being cooperative, however, is not a good strategy to win this battle.

2nd. It is always difficult for visitors to tell their own stories which are in most cases accompanied by bad memories. In order to avoid the story-telling, visitors will easily be trapped by certain details and tend to keep talking about things that do not have much to do with their real problems. In this case, as the time for consulting is limited, it is necessary for psychologist to shift the topic and make it back on track. In doing so, the psychologist sometimes will need to violate the maxim of relation.

3rd. When the visitors refuse to mention certain sensitive words, phrases or reasons, but they are key words and phrases or reasons vital to the problems they would like to solve, the psychologist needs to insist on asking them to speak those things out, even if they already know the answer and understands their hesitation. To ask something that is already known violates the maxim of manner, yet it is something necessary in psychological consulting.

Thus, through the analysis of the three excerpts selected from this specific novel, it may be concluded that the flouting of CP often happens in the context of psychological consulting due to the needs in the specific context, and further the characteristics of the language seen from a pragmatic perspective.

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